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Bill Tucker

Eastern Michigan University

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The Listener's Stance

Bill Tucker
Eastern Michigan University

In our seminar conversations, I emphasized that, in order to be the teacher you want to be, you must become the people from whom your students want to learn. This comes from taking a listener stance with students and bringing them to the understanding that as a teacher you actually want to know them in the same way I want to know you. -- Julie Conason

The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. -- Mikhail Bakhtin

What do you picture when you picture teaching? Someone performing in front of a classroom? Conferring with a few students? Pondering the week's lesson plans? Evaluating student work? Consulting with other teachers? Do you see teachers listening when they teach or are they speaking and orchestrating events? How would you even begin to represent the listener's stance?

The distance between teaching and its public images frequently obscures what happens in real classrooms. Those who work outside the classroom like to represent teachers as performers or technicians. The camera, the sound bite, and the teacher evaluation narrative fail to capture the complete teacher. Teachers themselves may overlook the most invisible role they play, the role that the substitute teacher cannot construct from the lesson plan left on the desk. (How often have you dismissed a possible lesson plan, because the listener's stance could not be translated for an unknown substitute teacher?) The listener's stance permeates teaching, and yet is lost in translation.

Culturally teachers are most often defined as

performers. Watch any television advertisement for a university or a brief video rendering of "teacher" and you will see someone talking or gesturing. Watch any child playing school, and you will see lecturing and reading out loud and pointing. Look at the script a student teacher writes to plan her first lesson. These all portray solo performances. Yet when I think back to my best teaching in high school, I see myself waiting for a student to elaborate on his one-word answer or listening to a young writer talk about the few halting sentences committed to paper. I've forgotten my classroom performances. And so, presumably, have my students.

Politically, teachers are more often portrayed as technicians, applying standards, content expectations, even scripts to execute a curriculum. "The hardest part of teaching is planning," declared Sue Carnell, Education Advisor to Jennifer Granholm, the Governor of Michigan, to an incredulous audience of high school educators at the rollout of Content Expectations for High School Language Arts in April this year.

Most experienced teachers would regard planning as the enjoyable part of the process, like composing a draft in a fit of inspiration. Teaching is what happens when the plan takes on a life of its own in the classroom. Apparently Ms. Carnell taught in the era when teaching was "packaged" and "delivered." Curriculum was sometimes called "teacher-proof." I remember that era. I am hoping to outlive it.

During the 1990's "reflective practice" competed with the "teaching-as-delivery" model. Donald Schon brought us closer to essential teaching by describing what happened when the lesson went awry: "Through the unintended effects of action, the situation talks back. The practitioner, reflecting on this backtalk, may find new meanings in the situation which lead him to a new reframing. Thus he judges a problem-setting by the quality and direction of the

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reflective conversation to which it leads” (135). This close-up view of the teacher as problem-solver began to illuminate the complexity of teaching.

Yet even “reflection-on-action” creates some distance between the learning event and the teacher’s afterthoughts. Reflection requires conscious and extended separation from the mind-numbing routine and bureaucratic demands of schools. Teachers may perceive reflection as a luxury like the twenty-minute coffee break and the sixty-minute lunch hour. John Dewey described reflection as “turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked . . . (57). Great idea, John, but what teacher has the time to be that thorough in the middle of the term?

Listening, however, is not optional for effective teaching. We have to listen or lessons drift into tangents, students misinterpret our directions, conspiracies bloom under our noses, despair breaks out in a corner of the room. We have to pay attention, whether we have the time or not. Listening is how we develop from technicians to teachers, the part we call “experience.” It’s the part they can’t teach you in college, the part that the media cannot capture. Listening means “paying attention,” but it also means seeing the implications of what we hear and acting on them. It is at the heart of what we call “responsive teaching.”

A lucid illustration comes from the previous issue of *LAJM* (Winter/ Fall 2005) in which Kari Scheidel described how she listened to her fifth graders as she acquainted them with the varieties of poetry. She had decided to connect the reading of Sharon Creech’s *Love That Dog* to writing poetry on the second day of the unit. When she interrupted the students in their reading of this compelling book, Kelsey moaned, “Do we have to stop?” Kari took a hard line and said, “Yes, you need time to write your own poem.” So they did.

Then Kari modeled what responsive teachers do—listen!

*For the rest of the day and that evening,
Kelsey’s comment continued to come back
to me. What was I doing? Why was I making
her stop? I decided I was doing what we*

traditionally think teachers are supposed to do. It is our job to break up our teaching, our students’ learning, so it is in manageable chunks and pieces. I was making up a formula for teaching so to speak. No wonder she was frustrated. I wasn’t giving her or my other students credit. I was taking too much choice away from them. I knew this was a mistake. I believe firmly in giving children choices. After all, we all have different needs as learners. Children are more actively engaged in their learning when they have some control over that learning (59).

The next day Kari worked out a new schedule so that students could plan their own time to write poetry, and they could return and complete the reading of Creech’s compelling story of Jack becoming a poet. In her article, reflection began with listening to her students and continued with questioning herself, until she decided to revise her lesson plan to support her better judgment about teaching poetry. Listening to the “backtalk of the situation” led to reflection and reflection to the alteration of the plan. That’s responsive teaching, and yet I’ve never seen it performed in the media like that. The camera does not love complexity, and responsive teaching is complex.

If we listen to Mikhail Bakhtin, listening is much more connected with speaking than we might realize. “. . . when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding, from the very beginning—sometimes literally from the speaker’s first word”(68).

In this dynamic experience, the listener is simultaneously attending and responding. Every word from the speaker becomes a cue for responding and the response is shaped and re-shaped as the speaker’s utterance unfolds. This challenges the conventional model of listening in which we first receive a message in its entirety and then respond to it. Bakhtin claims that we are forming our response

at the same time we receive the speaker's message. The listener is shaping and re-shaping a response as the speaker's message (or "utterance") unfolds. In this view the intent listener resembles the reflective practitioner considering a topic "so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked."

Bakhtin gives us a clue to what makes a good listener: one who carefully considers the speaker's message from start to finish before beginning a rejoinder. Bad listeners are not only those who pay no attention to us, but those who seize on a fragment of our message or evaluate our message prematurely, before our intentions are fully revealed. Bad listeners may react to words like red flags, failing to evaluate their entire context. A good listener relentlessly considers what has been said until the utterance is complete. The rejoinder has been revised repeatedly during the entire listening process. The speaker's message and the listener's response are interactive. You might not believe this, if you have listened only to press conferences and candidate forums. Some listeners have their responses prepared before the speaker even comes to the microphone, but they would not be good teachers.

Reflective thinking is really listening to yourself. It encourages the schizoid tendency to listen to an alter ego, your inner commentator. Reflective writing also has this dialogic quality, as the teacher processes the "backtalk" of a lesson for evaluation and planning. We have witnessed this process above from Kari Scheidel's point of view.

Unintentionally I discovered that reflective writers were also excellent listeners. I was studying the reflective writing of National Board-certified teachers to see how they taught themselves to teach better. I had seen that NBCT's knew how to reflect in writing, because they had to compose a reflective classroom narrative for their qualifying portfolio for Board certification, and I had already collected reflective writing samples from fifteen NBCT's.

I had arranged to interview each teacher online in a web caucus environment: a serial discussion similar to a chat group. To bring closure to these interviews, I invited them to join a "Reflective Congregation," an online group discussion about their writing for National Board

certification. One conversation engaged three Board-certified teachers about how they used reflective writing to think through teaching problems. To the discussants, this conversation was spellbinding. Their web caucus reflections resonated deeply, because they paid attention to each other. Their dialogue probably would not have made a lively script for a morning talk show, but it helped them understand how reflective writing had enriched their professional lives.

The web caucus turned out to be the perfect environment for allowing teachers to reflect on their practice and about their writing about practice. The dialogue excerpt below shows how recursive a reflective teacher is, returning to a topic multiple times to make sense of it, that persistence in "turning a topic over." The same scrutiny applies to their listening to each other. The teachers draw themes from each other's words, words about how they sustain a hypothesis or a question by writing about it. In the words of Bakhtin, they would "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" each other's messages (89).

While these teachers shared in common the experience of becoming National Board-certified and the collegiality of their own local teacher research groups, they were different in many other respects. Pat was a white first grade teacher from Iowa. Linda was a white high school teacher, soon to be literacy consultant, from Michigan. Renee was an African-American high school teacher from Mississippi. Before this discussion began early in 2003, the three teachers had never met or spoken.

Response 2.42 Pat March 20, 2003

I also find this discussion addictive. I read and re-read what all of you say and then I react. Later I come back to many of the questions and thoughts. I wish I took the time to write more of them down, but this online discussion is like a journal discussion and you can come back and reflect of all of our thoughts. It gives me an important reason for writing. It's a framework for continued thinking about reflection. Does this make sense?

Response 2.43 Linda March 21, 2003

*As I review my journals, I use it to **process a reading**. I have been going back to people I read years ago as well as new people and **reading slower, writing reflectively, and then following those thoughts reflectively for a week** or so it is like **carrying a thought thread and mining my life to look deeper into it**.*

Response 2.44 Bill March 25, 2003

*I hear both Linda and Pat saying that reflective writing and the caucus work **as links to ongoing thinking, a way to bridge thinking** that doesn't yield to first-draft thinking. What is remarkable about this writing is how it is preserved from writing to writing. It's **a thought process that sustains itself over time**. I've often noticed that class discussions lose their impetus when you try to re-create them in the next class. **Reflective writing seems more durable**.*

Response 2.45 Renee March 31, 2003

*Sorry for my long absence; had to go through an internet service change. Bill, about the concept of **reflective writing as bridge thinking**. . . I have noticed in my journals how **I can drop, then later pick up threads of later conversation** (self-talk). Then I noticed, that I do the same thing with the person to whom I am close (**my husband and I, for example, have a running conversation that simply pauses while we go to work, sleep, etc.**)*

From the *content* of this conversation I learned that reflective writing was a way to preserve thinking over time, not in a linear way like a diary, but in a constructive way, each entry building on the previous one. Spontaneous discourse, in conversation and journals, sometimes disappoints us, because it seems random or merely chronological, not continuous or woven like a fabric. Reflective writing becomes reflective when it is persistent and continuous, a cohesive conversation.

On closer examination this conversation was rich with semantic connections, teachers thoughtfully building on the words of the previous speaker. Pat observed this first ("It's a framework"), then Linda noticed the analogy to her own journals, and Renee made the comparison with her ongoing conversation

with her husband: three remarkably parallel instances of reflection. I offered the name "bridge thinking" for this reflective writing.

The boldface text illustrates how this concept is repeated in sometimes identical, sometimes analogical phrases by each speaker.

These are the *semantic connections* that reveal careful listening to the previous speaker.

Example Semantic Connections

Pat: a **framework** for continued thinking about reflection

Linda: like carrying a **thought thread** and mining my life

Bill: a way to **bridge thinking**. . .

a thought **process that sustains itself** over time

Renee: pick up a the **threads of a later conversation**

A **running conversation** that simply pauses

Each speaker adds a little to the thinking of the previous one, by recapitulating and modifying at the same time. A "framework" becomes a "thought thread" becomes a "bridge," becomes a "thread of conversation." Each of these metaphors adds something to the theme, while sustaining the previous message. I think of how constructive this conversation is compared to televised discussions: "Firing Line" or "The Capitol Gang" or "The Sports Reporters," where combativeness is an indication of intellect. The reflective conversation moves forward not by contentiousness, but by "eloquent listening," in the words of Kim Stafford. To its participants it is resonant and inspiring: to the eavesdropper or the casual viewer or the channel surfer, probably a bit dull.

Bakhtin suggests that this responsiveness is the expected pattern of all utterances: "Our speech, that is all our utterances (including creative works) is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,' varying degrees of awareness and detachment"(89). Not all dialogue is so fluid and responsive, but the eloquent coherence of these web caucus exchanges can be credited to the faculty of listening and incorporating "otherness" into "our-own-ness." The listener's stance allows each speaker to preserve what

the previous speaker has said, while assimilating it. The modification of the language shows that the listener has internalized the words and reworked them for his or her own purpose.

I've suffered too many disjointed and disagreeable discussions to take this conversation for granted. Even among classroom teachers, discussions may not maintain the balance of "otherness" and "our-own-ness." I suspect what we lack as teachers, in classrooms and teachers' lounges, to achieve this synchronicity is a "listener's stance."

This stance is not captured by the video camera, the standardized test, or even by the art of fiction. How can you portray a teacher listening, unless you painstakingly reconstruct how learning happened in deliberate steps? We can see it in Kari Scheidel's article. We can see it in the web caucus discussion. Teacher research evokes it in professional discourse, both conversation and writing. But you won't find it in your morning paper or the district newsletter or the school board commendation for "teacher of the year." The discourse of real teaching lacks the melodrama that the casual reader expects. Yet it *is* dramatic.

In the appendix of *Love That Dog*, Kari's students found the William Carlos Williams poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," which was often referenced in the book. They wanted to know, "Why did so much so depend on this wheelbarrow anyway?" So Kari read it out loud again and asked, "What happened this time when I read the poem to you?"

"I saw the red wheelbarrow while you were reading. It was cool how the picture changed while you were reading," answered Alexa.

"What do you mean the picture changed?" I asked.

"It was like I could see more and more detail as you read each line." (57)

Brilliant. It seemed like Alexa had read Bakhtin. She had defined listening as a continuous, constructive process. Kari had defined teaching the same way in her article. I was seeing the same process in the language of the reflective teachers in

my study. We were each listening, each reflecting, each experiencing the muted glory of authentic teaching.

In my teaching life I've noticed this stance most often from my colleagues of the National Writing Project. When I speak with these teachers at my own site or sites across Michigan or even at the national meetings at NCTE each fall, I am struck by the intent focus of the listener. Suddenly I'm listening to what I'm saying more acutely, because the teacher listening to me is so expectant. And I know what it must be like to be a student in that teacher's class: electrifying. These are "the people from whom your students want to learn" (Conason 8).

I asked myself, how can I explain what makes these teachers special? How can I portray the listener's stance? Does it have legs? Will it step out of reflective writing? Will it stand still for the camera? Will it reveal itself in a truthful narrative? So, almost a year ago, I began to scribble these words.

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About the Author

Bill Tucker is a Professor of English at Eastern Michigan University and Director of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project.